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Peer Relations And Social Skills Training: Implications For The Multicultural Classroom

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The importance of peer relations has been established in a growing body of research on the effects of peer rejection and social isolation (Asher & Coie, 1990; Hartup, 1989; Schneider, Rubin, & Ledingham, 1985). Children who have problems in peer relations or who are without friends are at risk for later adjustment problems (Cowen, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo, & Trost, 1973; Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972). I (1985) have found that children rejected by their peers in kindergarten are likely to be less socially adjusted in grade 3.

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Peer relations is one of the most important factors in any classroom functioning. Harmonious relationships among the students make for a positive classroom climate which is critical to successful learning. It is proposed here that this is particularly true of the multicultural classroom or any classroom with language minority children. Why?

Social behavior, more than cognitive or academic behavior, is situation-specific and culture-related. Language minority children, as would likely be the case of recent immigrant children, face the difficulty of having to cope with a new language and possibly a different set of social rules, norms, and values. For example, assertive behavior, a behavior valued in western societies may not be as acceptable in some other cultures. Furthermore, communication skills are essential to effective social interactions, and language minority children may have difficulty expressing themselves or communicating their intentions and may also have difficulty in reading or interpreting others' social cues or intentions. However, the issue of peer relations in multicultural classrooms is very much understudied and underaddressed in the literature (McLoyd, 1990). In a special issue on research on minority children published in *Child Development* (McLoyd, 1990) only 6% of the 76 manuscripts submitted dealt with social competence.

A body of empirical literature on social skills deficits and social skills training has been accumulating in the last ten years as a result of the recent integration movement; so has parallel literature on peer relations in handicapped children (e.g. Strain, 1984; Strain, 1990). Yet there have been few studies examining this issue in relation to ethnic language minority children. Futhermore, the findings from the existing literature have not found their way into or affected classroom practices involving minority children.

The purpose of this paper is to first address the issue of peer relations and the importance of social skills training for language minority students, to give a brief review of the relevant research on social skills training, and finally to suggest some practical classroom application

Peer Relations and the Importance of Social Skills Training for Multicultural Classrooms

The idea that immigrant children may have difficulty with their initial entry into an unfamiliar group is not surprising based on the "newcomer" hypothesis (McGrew, 1972). According to this hypothesis, the newcomer tends to be initially inhibited, shy, and fearful on the first day of school. In the same way,

it may take a new immigrant child, or young minority children in general, longer to develop social relationships in school (Leung, 1990). Successful entry into a peer group is a prerequisite for further social interaction.

Consider the case of Ming, a 9-year-old boy from rural China, who had been in Canada for only 7 months when I saw him. He was referred by his school for uncooperative, aggressive behavior and occasional temper outbursts. He attended an English as second language (ESL) class for part of the day and was integrated into other classes for the rest of the day. Classroom observations indicated that Ming became easily frustrated, and his frustrations centered around peer interactions. He did not seem to know how to share, how to request politely instead of just taking without asking, or how to read other people's intentions. His frustrations were frequently expressed in aggressive behavior which in turn further alienated him from his peers. Interviews with Ming's family revealed that "taking or fighting for" what he wanted was his usual way of coping at home.

Admittedly one of the reasons for the lack of peer group acceptance is often prejudice (Aboud, 1988), and prejudice is still very much a part of language minority children's experience. As a result much of the preventive and intervention efforts in promoting social acceptance of minority children has been focused on changing attitude and combating prejudice. Teaching materials in that area have also been developed (e.g. Pasternak, 1979). Modifying peer group responsivity and fostering an open sensitivity to cultural and linguistic diversity on the part of teachers and majority peers are of utmost importance.

However, it should also be recognized that peer acceptance or rejection is a social process, and the peer group structure and bias, as well as the individual child's social competence contribute to it (Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990). Therefore, minority children's own social skills repertoire, what they bring into the social encounter, needs to be considered. Take the case of Kaling, a 4-year-old Chinese girl who immigrated with her family to Canada from Hong Kong at the age of two. At the time I saw her, she had been in a preschool program for 6 months and had not yet spoken a word in class. Her teacher, who had worked with many ESL children was concerned that Kaling might have a problem beyond that of adjusting to a new environment. The classroom atmosphere was warm, receptive, and supportive, and the other children were all friendly and eager to befriend her. Kaling, however, was unable to respond to their friendly approach because of her own anxiety and extreme shyness. It appears in this case that the minority child's own social skills weaknesses may well contribute to her difficulty in establishing effective peer relationships.

A cursory glance at the extant literature on the education of language minority students reveals an apparent lack of emphasis on social skills and social skills

training. Much more emphasis is placed on cognitive, language, and academic skills rather than on affective and social skills. A case in point is the Profile of the Beginning Teacher developed by the California State University System (Garza & Barnes, 1989). It describes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for beginning bilingual multicultural teachers. Under the category of instructional factors, only three of the eleven factors deal with the affective and social domain directly, although a variety of groupings such as cooperative learning to motivate the students' success are included.

Cooperative learning methods and cooperative group work are effective strategies, based on the group perspective, in promoting peer group interaction among students as well as facilitating first and second language acquisition (see McGroarty, 1989 for a review). However, what is being argued here is that a more **interactive, environmental** perspective be taken as both the **group** and the **individual** contribute to the social interaction. The approach which modifies the environment assumes that the child has the ability to behave appropriately if environmental barriers are removed. This may not always be the case, and there are children who do not have the ability to behave in socially appropriate ways. Therefore, in addition to modifying peer group responsivity and receptivity using approaches such as cooperative learning, enhancement of social skills for all or certain individual children should be included as part of a more comprehensive approach to maximizing effective peer interaction.

Social Skills Problems and Social Skills Training

There are a number of ways of conceptualizing social skills problems. Two widely used models are presented here: a sociometric status model (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982), and Gresham's four-fold classification system (1981).

Conceptualization of social skills problems. The sociometric status model identifies five status groups on the basis of positive and negative peer nomination in which children are asked to name three peers they like the most and three peers they like the least to play with or work with. The five groups are: (a) popular, (b) neglected, (c) rejected, (d) controversial, and (e) average. Knowing the sociometric status of children is helpful in determining the types of social skills training required. Neglected children are those who have no best friends within their class but are not particularly disliked, whereas rejected children are disliked and do not have friends. The two groups of children are not the same; rejected children are more aversive in their interactions with peers and might be

more difficult to change (Asher & Coie, 1990). For example, they may be quick to react in a hostile manner that creates more problems. In the case of peer relation problems of minority children in a classroom with mostly children from the mainstream, it may be speculated that their sociometric status is "neglected" rather than "rejected," as consistent with the newcomer hypothesis. Newcomers are often shy, and shy children tend to be neglected rather than rejected because they make less of an impact on their peers.

Gresham's (1981) four-fold classification model conceptualizes social skills problems into four basic types depending on whether the child has the knowledge to perform a given social skill (acquisition versus performance deficit), and whether interfering responses are present or absent (e.g. anger, anxiety, impulsivity): (a) skill deficits, (b) performance deficits, (c) self-control skill deficits, and (d) self-control performance deficits.

Children with social skills deficits either do not have the necessary skills in their repertoire or they may not know a critical step in the performance of a given skill. For example, a child may not know how to initiate a conversation or how to join an activity. Children with social performance deficits know how to perform a given skill but do not perform it at an acceptable level. Self-control skill deficits describe those who have not learned a particular social skill because some interfering behaviors have prevented the acquisition of the skill. For example, some socially withdrawn children may not learn social approach behaviors because of anxiety. Children with self-control performance deficits know how to perform particular social skills but either will not perform or do not perform the skill at an acceptable level because of the presence of some interfering behavior such as anger. This type of classification system is useful because of its direct intervention implications. Knowing whether it is a skill or performance deficit helps to determine the skill training strategies.

Based on their conceptualization of social skills problems, Gresham and Elliott have recently developed the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) for the assessment of social skills of children and youth aged 3 - 18 years (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). The SSRS is designed to promote intervention planning and to provide the much needed link between assessment and intervention. It is a multirater system, obtaining the viewpoints of the teacher, the parent, and the student. A unique feature is the "importance" ratings which provide a means of establishing the social value of the behaviors being assessed and thereby the behavior to be targeted for intervention.

Social skills training strategies and their effectiveness. A review of the social skills training literature indicates three major approaches to intervention: (a) operant conditioning, (b) social learning theory, and (c) cognitive-behavioral

theory (Gresham & Elliot, 1990; Matson & Ollendick, 1988).

The basic principle of operant conditioning is that behavior is controlled by its consequences. The consequence, the event following the behavior, either increases (reinforces) or decreases the probability of its recurrence. For example, in the case of social skill training for Kaling, every time she participates in a group activity, she will be given a hug by the teacher. The teacher's hug then reinforces Kaling's participation behavior. Operant procedures used in social skills training include the following: (a) the manipulation of antecedents such as peer social initiation procedure (Strain & Fox, 1981) and cooperative learning strategies (Madden & Slavin, 1983); and (b) the manipulation of consequences involving the use of reinforcement, peer-mediated reinforcements, and group contingencies.

The cooperative learning procedure, as already mentioned, is one technique frequently referred to in the literature on language minority children. It requires students to work together, to cooperate, and to help one another in completing a task. The peer social initiation procedure, which requires a trained peer confederate to initiate positive interactions with the socially withdrawn child has been found to be effective in increasing such children's social interaction. Group contingencies, arrangements in which consequences are given to some or all members of a group as a function of the performance of one, several, or all of its members, are effective for teaching social skills in the regular classroom and are particularly attractive to teachers because of the economic use of teacher time and effort. Teachers are more likely to use intervention procedures which require minimal teacher time, effort, and resources, which employ positive rather than aversive methods and which involve the whole class rather than singling out individual children.

Social learning procedures include modeling, both live and symbolic, and role playing. For the child who has the prerequisite skill but who is not performing at an acceptable level (i.e. performance deficit), operant methods are often effective. But for the child with a skill deficit, modeling procedures are more appropriate for the acquisition of new behavior, as in the case of a new immigrant child learning how to initiate social approach behavior. In Ming's case, social skills training would include modeling of how to ask politely, how to share, and how to cooperate.

Cognitive-behavioral procedures include coaching, problem solving, and self-instruction. Coaching typically involves direct verbal instruction in social skills, an opportunity to practice these skills (guided rehearsal), and a review session with the coach. Coaching has been found effective in increasing socially isolated children's peer acceptance and entry into groups (Oden & Asher, 1977:

Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). The social problem-solving approach is concerned with teaching children alternative adaptive solutions and has become a common part of several classroom social skills curricula. This approach is more effective with students with performance deficits. In practice most social skills training programs combine several training techniques or components.

The studies reviewed thus far have not involved language minority children. However, it may be argued that such training techniques are also applicable to the social skills training of minority children, with the proviso that in the initial stages nonverbal techniques are to be used. Those cognitive-behavioral strategies which rely heavily on verbal instruction and self-verbalization will therefore be less likely to be useful with minority children who do not have sufficient English language proficiency.

A study by Fry and Li (1982) implemented a 12-week training program for enhancement of self-perception and social interaction in Asian immigrant children, grades one to five. The training procedures, based on social learning and cognitive-behavioral approaches, included modeling, coaching, and role playing using a small group format. Training meetings were conducted bi-weekly for 30 minutes each during class time involving both the target Asian children as well as their mostly Caucasian peers. The training was found to be effective in improving peer ratings and reducing peer-rejection scores for both Asian and Caucasian 3rd - 5th grade children but not for 1st and 2nd grade children.

In a major review of 33 studies that used cognitive-behavioral training procedures such as coaching, modeling, and social problem-solving, Gresham (1985) found modeling and coaching to have the strongest empirical support in terms of social validity of the outcome measures, generalizability of the training, and cost effectiveness. It was not clear whether the addition of cognitive components such as self-instruction and problem solving improved the effectiveness of procedures using modeling and coaching.

Another major review of 51 studies using meta-analysis was conducted by Schneider and Byrne (1985). Meta-analysis is a method for performing quantitative syntheses of a large collection of studies on a common topic. It involves reducing study findings to a common metric, effect size (Glass, 1977). The social skills training techniques were classified into four categories: coaching, modeling, operant conditioning, and social-cognitive. "Social-cognitive" was coded when the intervention focused on any of the cognitive processes associated with social competence such as problem solving, role taking, and self-statements. Of the found training categories, operant procedures was found to have the largest effect size, followed by modeling, coaching, and

social-cognitive, but only the difference between operant and social-cognitive procedures approached statistical significance. Training (most pronounced for coaching and modeling, but not for operant) was found to be less effective for elementary-aged children than for preschoolers and for adolescents. In addition, training (particularly modeling) was found to be more effective for the socially withdrawn than for aggressive children. The implications are that age differences and the types of techniques are factors to be considered in designing social skills training. This necessarily brief review indicates considerable support for the effectiveness of social skills training procedures in general and for operant and modeling procedures in particular (Gresham & Elliott, 1990).

Implications for the Multicultural Classroom

The argument advanced in this paper has been that both perspectives, changing the environment and enhancing the child's social competence, be considered in the promotion of positive peer relationships in the multicultural classroom. In addition to our current efforts in changing the environment by modifying group responsivity, teachers should also consider the child's own strengths and weaknesses. What can we learn from the social skills literature? How can the research findings be translated into classroom practice? A number of implications are suggested below:

1. Given the reciprocal nature of social interaction, a proactive teaching approach to help language minority children develop competence in social situations should be encouraged. To the extent possible, social skills instruction should be integrated into the school curriculum beginning in the kindergarten years. A number of social skills curricula and programs for the classroom are available. For example, the Skillstreaming series by Goldstein and colleagues (1980), based on the structured learning approach, provide instruction in prosocial skills, such as classroom survival skills, friendship making skills, and alternatives to aggression. Skillstreaming involves several steps: (a) modeling the skill, (b) practicing the skill through role-playing, (c) providing feedback on performance, and (d) using the skill in other settings for the transfer of training.

2. Teachers in multicultural classrooms should receive inservice training which equips them with knowledge of theory and research relating to peer relations and social competence thus empowering them to apply the strategies necessary to enhance their students' social skills.

3. In terms of training strategies, **group** procedures involving the entire class, which directly or indirectly influence peer group attitudes are especially

recommended. Cooperative learning, group tasks with group goals, and any group-oriented contingency methods which reward cooperative behavior should be structured by the teacher to promote greater responsivity and cooperation among **all** children.

4. Training procedures involving **peers** should also be encouraged. This could be peer social initiation procedure or a more general buddy system, particularly for the new child entering the class for the first time, for research has clearly indicated the importance of friendship, even of one friend as a buffer. It could be a same-language peer or a cross-ethnic/language peer. What is important is having a **friend.**

5. Strategies for working with individual children who have social skills problems should include some form of assessment, for example Gresham's Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), to target specific skills and to determine the most appropriate strategies to follow. Gresham's SSRS includes an importance rating, which asks the teacher to rate how important each of the social behaviors is for success in the classroom, and this makes it particularly applicable to language minority children. Using the importance ratings, one can determine if the child's behavior is related to a difference in perceived importance of the social behavior involved. Research indicates that age of the child, type of social skills problems (acquisition versus performance deficit, withdrawal or aggressiveness), and sociometric status (rejected or neglected) are all important factors to be considered in planning social skills training.

6. Operant procedures, including group contingency systems already mentioned, appear to have more research support for most age groups. For the preschoolers, operant, modeling, and coaching can be combined, as the need for this age seems more to be the acquiring and developing of new social skills. Cognitive-behavioral procedures such as self-instruction and social problem solving are more often recommended for older adolescents because of their more mature cognitive development.

Clearly a body of research literature on peer relations and social skills training could be applied to the multicultural classroom. What is surprising is that we have not tapped it earlier.

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